

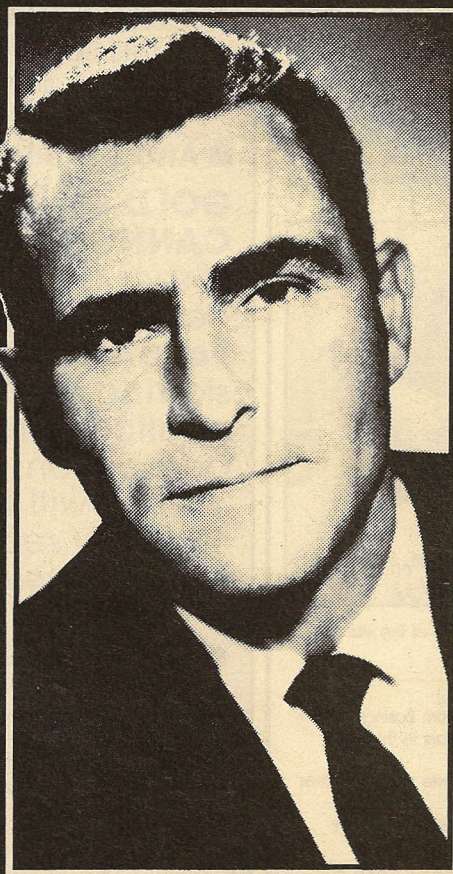
# THE TWILIGHT ZONE

**W**ith the advent of colour television in Britain in the late '60's/early '70's, television series made in black and white became redundant for quite a while. Now the novelty has worn off, and with the increase in airtime and shortage of material to fill it, recent years have seen the rediscovery of many classic 'lost' or forgotten TV series. Among the first shows to be resurrected were *Bilko* and *The Outer Limits*, and the success of the latter caught the BBC, completely by surprise and encouraged them to then pick up *The Twilight Zone* for the same slot.

Unfortunately, the gentler, softer style of this more whimsical series did not suit late-nights, and BBC2 decided not to pick up their option to show the next four seasons. At this point Channel Four stepped in, picking up the series from where BBC 2 left off, but no longer screening the series in sequence, or granting it a regular time-slot. Indeed, the first two episodes scheduled, including the most famous episode of all, 'Nightmare At 20,000 Feet' with William Shatner, were almost certainly going to be pulled out in favour of the inevitable TV God Of Sport, but *TV Times* neglected to mention this and the C4 switchboard was swamped with calls from irate viewers. This absurd action by C4 ('unaware of the show's cult following!') at least alerted them to the prize they had, although a promised regular slot has not been forthcoming. Sadly, C4 has compounded BBC 2's error in showing this series late at night, when an early six-o'clock slot would be far more appropriate and add a valuable juvenile audience to the ratings.

But first — some of the show's history. A controversial, liberal-minded TV writer in the 1950's during the birth of television, Rod Serling found himself no stranger to the play-safe policies of the controllers of this new medium. Constantly hampered in his attempts to write intelligent and controversial human dramas such as his award-winning *Requiem For A Heavyweight* for Playhouse 90, the increasingly frustrated Serling cunningly decided to get his points across by devising an anthology series. His outrageous fantasies based on the folklore and science-

Jon Abbott looks at the history of *The Twilight Zone*, Rod Serling's groundbreaking series. . .



fiction storytelling devices had used symbolism and fantasy to put over contentious opinions and morality tales. The TV bosses soon discovered that Serling was no changed, defeated man, but was still turning out his poignant tales of human fallibility and frailties in a fantasy format. By then though, they had a successful TV show on their hands. Not all of Serling's twist endings still pack the punch they did then, as numerous imitators have been inspired by his groundbreaking work, but the emotional impact, visual imagery, and particularly his message is as strong as ever. The thoughtful content and

inventiveness of his writing puts much modern-day fantasy to shame.

Serling wrote night and day for five years on *The Twilight Zone*, and no doubt with more time to refine his scripts and less pressure to produce a story a week, many of his tales would have been even better. He wrote almost all of the weekly episodes, winning a number of prestigious awards during his career, many of them for this series. He was assisted on occasion by other notable screen writers such as Richard Matheson and Charles Beaumont, and their ideas were realised by some very talented and inventive directors. As with those other influential series of the period, *The Naked City* and *The Outer Limits*, a number of budding young actors later to become familiar faces, cut their acting teeth on various episodes.

Among Serling's other credits are screenplays for the films *Seven Days In May*, and *Planet Of The Apes*, the latter featuring a typical Serling sting in the tail. His TV film *The Doomsday Flight*, about an infallible plot to hijack an aeroplane actually inspired a real-life criminal to utilise that same method, and provoked a slew of hoax calls. Serling abjectly apologised in public, consumed with guilt and distress, but later retracted his apology realising that no writer could stifle his imagination to try to predict the irrational behaviour of a segment of his audience.

Serling died in hospital on the operating table in 1975, aged 51, shortly after completing a follow-up series with a horror slant titled *Night Gallery* (see *Video Today Time-Shift* May 1984). He was obliged contractually to hose the series against his wishes after severe creative differences with the network. It was an enjoyable comic-book style spook show that inspired a number of lacklustre imitations including *Ghost Story*, *Circle Of Fear*, and *Darkroom*, all of them poor substitutes for Serling's series. It was an amusing, well-acted series, but *The Twilight Zone* remains this talented writer's greatest achievement. It remains an inspiration to fantasy writers in every medium, and the name is strong enough to have inspired a follow-up series of the same title in its honour, two decades on.